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ABSTRACT

Past and contemporary themes characterizing the structure and quality of children's lives are traced in this discussion. Specifically examined are various changes in family life patterns, new educational involvements in children's lives, and the emerging role of extra-familial and extra-educational sources of influence upon children's development. Changes in family life patterns discussed include the partial dissolution of the traditional family unit through separation, divorce, and desertion; the increasing rate of out-of-wedlock births; and the precipitous growth of full-time employment among mothers. Attention is given to problematic aspects of extra-familial, environmental influences on children's lives (such as the power of television and the ways schools support segregation of children from other children, adults, and work settings). Other problems discussed in the current political context of disregard for child welfare are those of poor and nonwhite groups, the learning disabled, and the handicapped. In conclusion, prospects for improving this unfortunate situation are pointed out, and questions concerning current trends and policy for the future are raised. (RH)

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Childhood in America: A Contemporary Portrait

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Children represent many things to us. As our progeny, they serve as a link toward, and hopefully, an inspiration for, future generations of children. In historical perspective they offer us a means for insuring continuity with our most immediate past and, in part, for assessing the extent to which the promises and commitments we have made to their generation, have, in fact, been realized. This paper traces past and contemporary themes characterizing the structure and quality of children's lives in present America. Specifically, it examines various changes in family life patterns, new educational involvements in children's lives and the emerging role of extra-familial and extra-educational sources of influence upon children's development.

Last year 3,598,000 children were born in America. How they will develop, what form future patterns of growth will assume, and under what social conditions development will occur, form the themes of this discussion. Specifically, we ask, what quality of life will our children experience, what hopes may they aspire toward, and what realities must they face and resolve?

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The American Family: A Brief Portrait. As historians have noted, the American family has changed substantially since the founding of the Republic. Yet observed changes, as Keniston (1977) notes, usually have mirrored the gradual movements and shifts of American society, most importantly, America's emergence from a rural, agrarian society to an industrialized, urban complex of economic enterprise.

Since the last World War, the pace of social-economic change has quickened. The slow, evolutionary process of change which has traditionally allowed for progressive adaptation has been replaced by massive shifts in society leading to consequences in family life which could hardly be anticipated. As the 1970 White House Conference on Children reported, a plethora of changes, both within the family e.g., lower birth rates, the decline of the extended family, the emergence of the working mother, and external to the family, e.g., consolidated schools, the growth of television, the emergence of day care have lead to an increasing likelihood for limited parent-child interactions, separation and isolation. These observations have been discussed in other contexts, as well (Coleman, 1974; Bronfenbrenner, 1973, 1975; Keniston, 1975).

Bronfenbrenner (1975), in viewing American family life patterns over the last 25 years, notes that rapidly accelerated changes have affected the traditional structural composition of the family, and its functional role(s), as well. Of the recent past Bronfenbrenner (1976) writes,

> There was a kind of family stability in the late 1940's and early 1950's. The extended family still existed in places; one out of 10 families had another adult relative living under its roof. . . the divorce rate was quite low, especially among families with young children. Only one mother in four was working outside the home. And fewer than four percent of all children were illegitimate. Parents fought for a better education for their children, kicking off a school and college-building boom. Television, which became commercially available to households in 1948, was almost unknown. Mass magazines wrote of "togetherness" and radio soap operas featured families. Hollywood made films about young Andy Hardy, Shirley Temple, and young Dorothy from Kansas, who went to see the Wizard of Oz but longed to return to her family (p. 425).

The portrait of American family life depicted in the above paragraph has changed radically. The changes enumerated are neither spurious nor isolated observations. Rather they represent consistent, changing trends in the nature of the American family, supported by census data compiled by Keniston and others (Bronfenbrenner, 1973, 1975, 1976.) Most importantly, they appear to represent only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, forecasting substantially deeper and more pervasive forthcoming changes in American family life.

Changes in the structure of family life in contemporary America have lead to dramatic alterations in the environments within which children develop. As Keniston (1977) writes, "Some children in this country have no contact with adults for extended periods of every day. They are either locked up alone in empty apartments or left for hours out on the streets, more prone than other children to getting into trouble. No one knows how many "latchkey"

children there are, but the fact that they exist at all contributes to the general feeling that American families are in real difficulty" (p. 7). Who then are rearing the children? Clearly not those parents, who in increasing numbers, are more apt to respond to the demands of jobs which claim evening hours and weekends, nor those who appear to spend increasing amounts of time commuting, entertaining, and meeting community commitments, or who find less and less time to work, play, read and listen to their children (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Nor is it likely, with declining birth rates, to find older brothers and sisters still living at home, able or willing to share child rearing responsibilities. Furthermore, with the decline of the extended family and increased mobility of individuals in today's society, accessibility to grandparents, aunts, and uncles is increasingly less likely; distance from relatives may reduce emotional support, sources of child rearing information available to parents, and sharing of child care responsibilities.

Three specific covariants, among a host of other conditions, contribute to the above picture. They include the partial dissolution of the tradition family unit through separation, divorce and desertion, the rising rate of out-of-wedlock births, and the precipitous growth of full-time employment among mothers.

Divorce rates, as Keniston (1975) reports, have risen more than 700 percent in the last century. Moreover, as Bronfenbrenner (1976) indicates, nearly 40 percent of all marriages now end in divorce, with three out of every ten women separating from their husbands before the age of thirty.

Supplementing these figures, we find a rising rate in the number of both males and females disregarding divorce in favor of desertion. While historically desertion has been primarily a male perogative, more recently females have chosen to abandon their husbands and children in ever increasing numbers; the incidence rate for the runaway wife now joins that of males as a major contributing factor in the creation of new single-parent families.

In the last 25 years the rate of illegitimacy has more than doubled, from 4 per 100 recorded live births to 10 per 100 recorded live births. In actual numbers, in 1975, 350,000 babies were born out-of-wedlock. Current data indicate that this figure now approximates 750,000 births each year. Most critically, a preponderance of these births represent unplanned pregnancies among school-age young people (Ogg, 1975; Nye, 1976). In all, 80 percent of all out-of-wedlock births are born to women under 25 years of age (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

One consequence of these observations, especially as they affect children, is that the number of children living in single-parent families is presently twice to three times that of a decade ago. Moreover, this pattern is most dramatically witnessed among children under six years of age. Specifically, in the mid 1970's, we find that 13 percent of all children under three years of age - nearly one million children - were living with only one parent (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). In contast, in 1948, one out of every fourteen children under six lived in a single-parent family. By 1973 that proportion had doubled to one out of every seven children. Current

predictions forecast a continuing to increasing pattern of children living in single-parent families. Hetherington (1979) states that 40 - 50 percent of all children born during the 70's will spend some time in a single-parent family. Furthermore, she estimates that the average length of time of assignment to a single-parent household will average six or more years. Currently, more than 18 percent of all children in the United States live in a single-parent family (Edelman, 1981).

Perhaps the most influential change in parent-child relations stems from rises in the rate of female employment, especially, among women with school-age children. As of 1978, 51 percent of all mothers of school-age children were working. Moreover, of these, approximately 33 percent had preschoolers or children under 6 years of age. Significantly, these figures represent a 500% increase over rates of maternal employment, as recorded, in 1940 (Tetenbaum, Lighter, Travis and Rabinor, 1980).

Present living arrangements and working patterns, as the cited data indicate, serve to belie the "Dick and Jane" myth of the American family. Presently, only one family in 17, less than 6 percent of all American families, includes a working father, a full-time homemaker mother, and children with no handicapping conditions (Edelman, 1981).

The External World. As the family has changed the extra-familial environment has come to assume a greater role in children's lives. In part, this change may be considered salutary, broadening the child's awareness and experience of persons and events which

complement his/her immediate interactions and surroundings. Indeed, the myth of the self-sufficient American family, characterized as independent, self-sustaining and protective of its members, emanates from another era, one ill-fitting current times. Yet, we need inquire, now that this myth has passed, what has replaced it? Specifically, what external influences have come to fill and occupy children's time and source of experience? Two such influences are school and television.

With the emergence of public education in the mid nineteenth century, formal education began to replace family education. This shift in practice, however, was gradual. Initially, public education was concerned with the development of vocationally directed skills. Only much later did the school begin to command additional attention, first in the teaching of ancillary personal and social skills (e.g., citizenship, character development), and more recent as the center of a child's day and principal source of participatory experiences.

Children spend an enormous amount of time attending school. A child entering school at four or five years of age, and continuing through high school and beyond, spends approximately 14 to 16 years of his/her life in school. Thus, the average American child spends most of his/her waking hours (approximately 7 - 8 hours a day, five days a week) among largely unrelated adults (i.e., its teachers) and other children. In contrast, a child's exclusive contact with his/her family is largely limited to the first 4 to 5 years of its life, and in some cases, even fewer. Schools, as Coleman(1974) finds,

indirectly support other forms of segregation from the child's natural world, as well. Specifically, schools perpetuate segregation from other children, as well as other adults. In the former case, age segregation (i.e., the classification and placement of children by birthdate) limits a child's contact with older and younger children, while in the latter form of segregation, schools tend to isolate children from the outside world, allowing little contact with adults in working situations outside the school.

Augmenting the gradual importance assumed by the school in children's lives, is the sudden infringement of television and the power it has assumed, second only to the school, as a source of children's information and experience.

Within the last twenty five years, television has become an extraordinarily potent force in American life. Children, as its primary consumer, currently spend more time viewing television than with either of their parents, playing with other children, or for that matter, doing anything else aside from sleeping, or attending school. What television does for/to children has been forcefully debated by proponents of various schools of thought (e.g., Bogart, 1972; Comstock, 1972; Liebert, Neale and Davidson, 1973, Children's Television Workshop, 1977; Comstock et al, 1978). Suffice to say, whether beneficial or detrimental, television has clearly become a pervasive force in the lives of children.

The preschool child under six spends an average of 50 hours a week watching television. The average child spends between two

and four hours a day in front of the television set. These latter figures exclude weekends where Saturday morning programming for children starts at 7:00 A.M. and continues throughout most of the day. By the age of sixteen the average child will have watched from 12,000 to 15,000 hours of television, a figure comparable to watching television twenty-four hours a day for fifteen to twenty months of his/her life. In one typical year, a child normally will see 25,000 commercials. Television, for many children, has replaced human interactions. While the consequences of such shifts cannot be directly calculated, as Keniston (1977) finds, "The difference between television and a human companion is striking. One can reprimand or even fire a baby sitter who constantly talks of murder, mayhem, and violence, or how wonderful the latest toys, cereals, and candies are, but it is impossible for an individual parent to influence programs and advertisements that do the same thing." Moreover, as Keniston observes, "If what is broadcast consistently conflicts with the parents' values, they have virtually no recourse short of smashing or locking up the set. . ." (p. 7)

The Plight of Children Today. For many children life is unfair and inequitable. For the poor, the nonwhite, the learning disabled, and the handicapped the chances of achieving a decent life are often far beyond the grim realities of daily survival. Approximately one quarter to one third of all American children live among poor families who face financial strains so great that their children will suffer basic deprivations for part or all of their lives. For such

children life will consist of less food, more crowding, poor schooling (if any), little privacy, few toys, and less chance of surviving the very first year of life (Keniston, 1975, 1977).

As Tulkin (1972) observes, in America, the poor are less than poor. They are poor while others are rich. They must endure the glaring contrast of life styles, knowing that the grass is really greener elsewhere, but having little power to demand a more equitable share.

Approximately ½ million children do not live in a family at all, while ten million, about 17 percent, live in a family at or below the poverty level (Edelman, 1981). Moreover, it has been estimated that 40 million receive inadequate medical attention and 10 million receive no health care at all (Zigler and Hunsinger, 1979). Edelman, 1981)

As Edelman (1981) has observed, "children are the easiest people to ignore" (p. 111). And we seem to have been doing just that. Moreover, efforts to improve the world of the child are not likely to be popular at this time. As Zigler and Hunsinger (1979) have observed "The American climate is becoming inhospitable to children" (p. 6). And prospects for the near future appear even less encouraging.

The status of minority and handicapped children is more problematic. Being nonwhite, both increases the probability of facing marginal economic status, as well as the likelihood of remaining poor. For among nonwhites, both poverty and lack of opportunity/discrimination covary. Among the learning disabled and the handicapped

prejudice/discrimination, and often simply lack of acceptance, prevail. For these children, the stigma of being different is often suffice to insure failure.

Other children, including those not classified as poor, nonwhite, or disabled/handicapped, face a growing plethora of hazardous/injurious problems of daily living. Some defy causation and immediate remedy. Others reflect lack of concern or neglect by adult society. They include children caught in the rising incidence of child abuse/neglect, increasing numbers of young suicides, growing rates of criminal involvement, and increasing academic failure (Bronfenbrenner, 1975). Among adolescents, we need add premature sexual involvement, increasing drug abuse, and growing violence within and external to the family, as related issues.

Conclusions. Our observations of changes in the child's familial and external worlds offer serious challenge to our concern for the quality of children's lives. Moreover, they signal a growing awareness of related difficulties affecting children. We know that for many children that life is far too hazardous and that opportunities for misguided development far too frequent an occurrence. For these children, the freedom and joy of youth has been replaced by anger and sadness. For these children, darkness and despair characterize much of their lives.

The uncertainties and ills of our time affect millions of children, those that currently live among us, as well as those that shall appear later. Moreover, they affect millions of adults,

including those that choose to bear and rear children, as well as those that nurture, teach, or serve the needs of children. Certainly, the quality of these lives have been, and will continue to be influenced by our commitment, or lack thereof, to improving the climates and environments of development, parenting and caring. But what of now? What immediate steps or programs need be advocated? And who shall formulate and implement them? The ills described require solution. Yet simple, quick answers are beyond the resources of any single individual. Moreover, the issues depicted have serious economic, social, and political ramifications, some of which undoubtedly serve as impediments to effective solution (Tulkin, 1972).

Broad sweeping commitments to change probably will require equally intense, smaller, more personal approaches to improvement. As Rheingold (1973) notes, we need to seriously question the nature of our commitment to children at all levels. If we require that a person who wishes to teach children obtain four years of collegiate education, can we continue to accept the idea that to rear a human being requires no education? Clearly, to require individuals to meet certain criteria in order to marry, to drive a car, to own a dog, to even catch a fish, without comparable accountability in the bearing and rearing of a child raises serious questions regarding our concern and treatment of children and parents. If we choose to view children as important, can we continue to classify those who care and rear them, specifically, their primary caretakers (in most cases, women) as being unemployed? Unproductive? Or between

situations? Can we afford to encourage people to care for children, particularly young children, while offering them little in the way of status or renumeration?

Can we afford to eliminate programs for children and families *en masse* without society experiencing severe and profound consequences?

If the prospects for children are to improve, the fate of our children need become a more important priority for us, as individuals and as a society.

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